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The Harvest

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A WEDDING SONG FOR CUPID AND PSYCHE

by Joe R. Christopher

Young Men: The diety can stoop to love,
The human soul can look above,
So Hymen io Hymen!

Young Women: The butterfly with varied hue
Is valued in the god's own view,
So Hymen io Hymen!

Young Men At first the love seems quickly won,
And then the love seems long withdrawn,
But Hymen io Hymen!

Young Women The butterfly quite shortly dies;
But two weeks lives, then dead it lies,
Still Hymen io Hymen!

Young Men At last the love through labors long
Is felt again and cause for song,
So Hymen io Hymen!

Young Women The butterfly with varied hue
By breeze is borne the god unto,
So Hymen io Hymen!

THE HARVEST

by Chris Westgate

Clad in a long, blueblack cloak that fluttered at her ankles, the slender figure surveyed the small village of Upper China from the hewn face of a short hill. Her scan read no advanced weaponry, nothing beyond knives and farming tools. She kneeled and breathed in the scent of spicy, smoking meat as the slim villagers mined through their daily routine. She rose, pulling her cloak tight at her neck, and slid down the hill as the shafts of diminishing daylight disintegrated into silent dusk.

She stood at the edge of the village long enough to be noticed. A few worried voices called out, pointing at her with short jabs of their fingers. Harried by her appearance out of swirling twilight, the villagers froze as if to blend into the background of bamboo huts and thatched roofs. Three men broke away from the rest and came toward her—still waiting at the edge of the village—their steps halting and measured carefully in the thin dust that swirled at each step.

When they stopped a few feet in front of her, she drew the cowl back from her face, revealing her black hair, dyed with zigzagging lines of silver, her large, warm brown eyes, and her thin mouth that spread into a cool smile.

"My name is Kyler Zelle," she said slowly, both to allow the mini-translator strapped to her wrist to work and to attempt to dissuade their obvious fear and distrust. With her unusual height, she towered over the shorter, almond-eyed Chinese. Only one reached her chin, and he was so marred by time that she hardly believed that he could stand without help.

Their stares didn't break once the translator finished. They fixed her with slow, steady eyes, scrutinizing her every movement.

"I have come to harvest those in need."

Fear lit a guttering fire in the eyes of the three men, then the ancient one cried out a single word. "Harvester!"

The village exploded into running and screaming below Kyler and the three men. She reached out and caught hold of the old man's arm. It felt like worm-tunneled wood with all of the veins jutting through the pallid, drawn skin. "I'm only here for the harvest. Why do you run?" she said. She easily overpowered the frail man's struggle to break free.

All the wrinkles drew themselves into a single line of hatred and he spat onto her cheek. Before Kyler could react,

one of the other men struck her across the head with a shovel he'd managed to conceal. She crumpled to her knees, pain flaring sharp and immediate, throbbing down to the base of her neck. Through the folds of her cloak that had sloshed over her shoulders, she could see the old man hobbling away on the arm of another, while the shovel-wielder drew his weapon back, the sharp edge intended for the back of her skull.

She gave a whispered command into the micro-communicator located in her jaw, and a moment later—as the shovel sliced through its arc with full intensity—a volley of concussion pods hammered the hills just fifty meters to the left of the village.

The blast flattened everyone, including the man with shovel, whose attack rang sharply off the rocks to the side of Kyler's head.

Grimacing, Kyler stood, flinging off the length of cloak along with her burned off patience. She'd tried to make it easy on them. So be it. Beneath the cloak, she wore a thin, green suit of meshmail that caught and trapped the remaining shafts of light in a maze of reflections along its surface. A stunblaster fit snugly beneath each arm. She didn't hesitate on the disoriented man in front of her, driving a boot into his forehead with just slightly less force than would shatter his skull.

Kyler leaped forward at the crowd of men armed with scythes and rakes, who tried to form a line at the edge of the village. Their faces mixed fear and anger in equal proportions. The stunblasters snapped into her hands and she blasted the first two from six feet, somersaulted forward, and hit another from point blank. The force of the impact flung him five feet up and back before he crashed into two more men, his body crackling with blue energy.

A scythe swung in at her side and she stepped inside the arc of the swing to take the handle of it across her side where the meshmail would deflect it. Just a step too slow, the edge of the blade sliced across her rib cage—not breaking the fluid line of armor, but drawing a stunned gasp as the force of the blow bruised deep.

She whirled, slapped the butts of the blasters together, and shot him with both stunblasters at once, sending him crashing through a crude bamboo wall. Putting her back to the building and the fallen man, she blasted three more closing at her. The remaining attackers lost their resolve, discarded their weapons, and scattered into the wind-rippled grassy hills. Kyler let out her breath in short, pained rasps that took several minutes to subside to normal breathing.

She herded the remaining villagers out into the open, after giving the centaur-tank the command to close on her signal. One long, trembling look at its sleek thermosteel carapace and multi-turreted tower, was enough to make them comply quickly and obediently. Centaur-tanks were the most powerful land weapons on the planet. The fifteen turrets on the center tower made it capable of firing in three hundred and sixty degrees at once; or if all fifteen turrets were directed at a single target, they unleashed enough

firepower to pulverize a large moon into beach sand. The villagers didn't know many of the specifics of the tank, but just the sight of the awesome weapon subdued any further thoughts of resistance.

Only the old man remained unimpressed. He squinted at the tank momentarily, then away as if he'd just noticed a grasshopper and that was all. The run down the hill and subsequent battle had taken their toll on the man though. He leaned heavily against a young boy, who strained to hold the elder up. The elder refused to even acknowledge Kyler's existence by looking at her, squinting into the distance behind her.

Kyler lined the villagers up and ran her medicscanner down their ranks. It scanned for any anomaly: incurable diseases, physical disabilities, insanities and other mental debilities. The medicscanner singled out four people. A broad-faced woman who was blind in one eye; a man with three cancerous growths in his left lung; a diabetic child; and the man who Kyler had double-blasted. The medicscanner detected brain damage from the massive surge of electricity through his nervous system.

"Pick up that man and put him in the tank. You three will come," she said coldly, with an edge of impatience in her voice. Her eyes, no longer warm and friendly, feigned no false compassion for these villagers. Every breath reminded her of how they had paid her for attempting a peaceful harvest. When many of them began to plead with her, she switched off the mini-translator.

The half blind woman and the cancerous man dragged the unconscious man to the tank, then looked back. Sobs broke the resentment on the woman's face and she tried to return to her husband, who cried openly. Kyler pointed the stunblaster at the face of the blind woman's husband. She turned, trembling, and climbed into the tank.

The mother of the diabetic child locked her arms around the child when Kyler came to take her hand. Kyler tried to pry the child free, but the mother screamed and begged, refusing to relent her hold. Kyler switched on the mini-translator.

"Your child has been harvested. She will be cared for; her needs will be met," she explained in a tone that was more threatening than soothing.

"This is wrong," the woman sobbed haltingly. "Cannot take my child! The states turn on each other like dogs hungry for more meat. People must be together. People must come before the.."

Kyler slapped her to the ground with the butt end of the stunblaster. She knew what the woman intended to say, and it burned away the last strand of her patience with these villagers. "No one is more important than the State!" she growled, slaving with the rage unleashed inside of her. "Don't you filthy people understand that! What is wrong with you? By harvesting the weak, we only make the rest stronger. You won't have to care for a sick child and she will receive all the aid she will need. What's wrong with you and your kind?" she howled.

She dragged the wailing child to the centaur-tank and

handed her to the cancerous man. The door slid shut with a metallic clank that cut off the child's anguished scream for her mother. Kyler turned to face the villagers, her stomach boiling with bitter acid. The villagers huddled around the child's mother like water rushing in to fill a void.

Only the old man didn't move. He stared at her for the first time. His face contained no fear or hatred as Kyler might expect, but rather silent disgust that felt like a red-hot poker against her skin. She felt horribly self-conscious somehow, and climbed into the center tower of the tank, wishing she was already back at the helio-craft.

Kyler rubbed some heal gel across the purple-blue bruise spreading across her left side, a blotch of tangible pain. She tried to focus everything out and just relax her mind as the helio-craft swooped in a lazy arc toward the skybarge. The pasty yellow gel numbed the pain somewhat, at least removing it from the forefront of her attention. The pain in her head had leveled to a steady throbbing along the base of her skull.

Try as she might, she could not keep her thoughts from spinning back to the old man's stare. It had pierced her down to the bone, filling her with a cold and helpless feeling. Somehow, that old man had made her feel five years old and ignorant of everything. She hated him for that.

She had met resistance before: about as often as the harvests went peacefully.

A few times the people had tried to kill her, but never had they looked at her as if she was some sort of bug or parasite, as if she wasn't quite human. Harvesters were globally feared and respected—if begrudgingly so. But the expression on that man's face had labeled her a monster without him ever saying a word. And she could not grasp why.

A century had already crept past since Harvesting began. The idea originated with a multi-billionaire, who had offered it as a solution for worldwide overpopulation and sociological problems. When people could not care for themselves or their families, the rich would buy their "lives." Harvesting was not slavery. Those harvested still maintained all fundamental rights of other citizens, but their needs were simply met by rich philanthropists, who either wished to purge their consciences or truly saw some good that their ultra-fortunes could do.

At first politicians balked at the very idea. It was too ghoulish, too medieval. But when many of the world governments simply could not maintain adequate care for many of its citizens, they legalized Harvesting. Only a specific group of people were eligible: the elderly, the mentally ill, the disabled, and life term prisoners. They could be sold by family or state to those who would provide for their care.

Harvesting quickly became a fad—conspicuous consumption to the nth degree. How many lives you owned quickly became a marker among the super rich, a status symbol. They came to be known as Collectors, and they competed against each other, throwing parties to show off

their massive amounts of lives.

But as with any noble endeavor, there is always that wicked turn of fate, that certain someone who sees a way to shift the focus just enough to make it not so noble, a way to take advantage for themselves. A black-market developed, a secret network of agents that would harvest illegally for the life-starved Collectors. They would seek out anyone who met the criteria for Harvesting and take them by force from families that had chosen not to have them harvested. No one quite remembered who instigated the black-market, but it quickly found its niche.

Kyler had no qualms about what she did. She was the third generation born into a world where Harvesting was part of everyday life. All of the guardians of misplaced freedom that had staunchly opposed the idea of Harvesting had died, defeated by the great enemy, time. Nothing remained to argue. To condemn Harvesting was as unthinkable as condemning the freedom to walk the streets.

And the words of the woman Kyler had slapped did just that. They flew in the face of all the good that Harvesting did for everyone. "People before the ... state." She had seen the horrific word form on her lips and it had ignited something deep inside of her. The one thing actually moving all the quibbling nations to a single, world government, was the abolition of the insanity that people were more important than the State. Once the State was provided for, then it provided for individuals in turn. With a solid, strong State, all things were possible. Kyler tasted a hot bitterness when she thought of those that dared to put themselves on pedestals above their government.

The smooth clank of the helio-craft docking roused Kyler from her thoughts. Umbilical beams pulsed outward from the ship, mooring it to the skybarge, and ramps slid up to the open hatch of the helio-craft.

Kyler slid from her seat and pulled her shirt back on, then went out the ramp. She glanced down, watching the deep grey clouds disrupted by the skybarge engines whining to life. They looked like huge, dirty sheep sucked into a grinder, but it shed no blood, only tufts of sheared cloud matter. Then she stepped onto the floor of the barge, where the applause waited to deafen her.

Men and women draped in jewelry and gold and long, silken robes that flowed to their feet—all the rage this year—all pressed in to congratulate her. Sweaty hands thrust at her from every direction—an octopus of pats on the back and handshakes. She nodded and tried to press through the knot of bodies. But they didn't move; they were redwoods, stiff in their grove around her, still applauding, thrilled to see her returned.

Then the crew of the helio-craft began to unload the villagers. Instantly, they developed locomotion and swept away from her in one collective movement. She slid through the arms and legs that trailed behind the overall movement of the crowd, until she was free. She hastened her step toward the lift-shaft across the bay.

Halfway there the supple baritone of Bennington Sheelf cornered her like a huge light cast onto someone hidden in

total darkness.

"Kyler! Kyler Zelle, my dear! You've outdone yourself this time," Bennington beamed, wagging his fat finger at her like he'd caught her at something she knew she wasn't supposed to be doing.

Rotund did little to describe Bennington; fat came closer but remained inadequate; finally, elephantine did the best job. His glistening purple robe, embroidered with gold and diamonds along the sleeves and sides, bulged to its utmost capacity, squared slightly, as if he were nothing but a huge cube with a head attached. He wore many rings which were locked in finality between the folds of skin on his short fingers. His robe gathered so thickly at his feet that Kyler wondered if he actually had any feet beneath all that fabric.

As he reached her, he looked her up and down as if tasting a particularly succulent morsel on his plate. "When I told you that I needed to add a few Upper Chinese to my collection, I never thought you would get them so soon!" He kissed his fingers and waved them in the air with a flourish. "Bravo!"

"Thank you, Bennington," she said. She wanted nothing more than to scurry into the lift-shaft and then into a quiet, dark room. But Bennington owned her contract, and paid very well, and wasn't so bad. It was his entourage that filled her with so much dread.

They came darting forward, as if they were surprised that he had bothered to talk to her when the prizes were available for few. But the remoras couldn't get too far from the shark if they wanted to pick at the leftovers in his teeth. They hurried around him, clucking at his choices, laughing at his jokes, smiling at anything he said or didn't say.

"I'm sure you're exhausted from your trip, so rest in your suite here. I've already taken the liberty to have it freshened up for you." He started to go, and all the little fish darted out of the way of the big whale of the sea. "Oh," he added, turning back and nearly stepping on a wisp of a woman who had followed just a step too close. "We'll be arriving at my estate by noon tomorrow. I do hope you'll stop in. There is something about which I simply must speak with you."

"Certainly," Kyler agreed, trying to look as weary as possible, which wasn't too far from the truth. Of course she would have agreed to almost anything just to be away from the constant press of hot, perfumed voices that filled the bay.

"Excellent!" Bennington beamed again. He ambled toward the crowd to feast his eyes on his newest additions. The remoras didn't even grant Kyler a cursory glance. She didn't care and nearly sprinted the last couple of meters to the lift-shaft.

As she was chauffeured through the rolling hills topped with brutal, steel sculptures, Kyler wished she hadn't taken a sleepbinder. They always left her feeling empty and slowed, like the air had become a morass that she had to fight through in order to move. But after half an hour in a steamshower and lying still for another two hours, she

hadn't been able to sleep. The face of the old man and the words of the woman who spoke against the state, haunted her, coming to vivid life against a din of screams whenever she tried to close her eyes.

Now she regretted forcing her body to sleep. She always liked to be at her best when around Bennington. It didn't do to show him a sloppy Harvester. She touched the switch to tint the windows and tried to rub some life into her eyes, hoping their meeting would be brief.

Bennington always received her in his holeroom, where three dimensional figures danced, screamed, chased, slept, made love, fought—most everything you could imagine—just within their screens that tiled the walls from floor to ceiling. The shadows of birds passed along the ceiling-screen, and Kyler instinctively hunched down. Bennington smiled like he'd just swallowed half the planet and couldn't wait for seconds.

"Kyler! My dear, come here," he said, beckoning her with fat, fully-ringed fingers. He wore a different robe, black with green jewels, elegant to the point of garish. Strangely, the remoras were absent.

"Hello, Bennington," she said, wincing at the unrelenting images against the walls all around Bennington's central chair.

"Please sit," he offered, pressing a button on his console at his chair. The floor split open next to her and a chair rose up, levitating on nearly silent air flows until the floor whispered shut. Kyler nestled herself into the chair. It was soft and slightly warmed. The scent of jasmine perfumed the air. She had to admit: she liked visiting Bennington's estate.

"Something to drink?" he offered, cordial and eager.

"No, thanks," she said, tilting her head to shield her eyes from the flashing figures along the walls.

"You haven't asked me about your payment," he said. His chair swiveled slightly, so that he faced a hologram just to her right where a pair of fencers duelled.

"I assume it's already been transferred to my account. You've always paid me well and promptly."

A smile split the rolls of flesh like an incision. "That's what I love about you, dear Kyler. So confident and understanding of how things work. Come, walk with me." He made to rise, lost his momentum, then forced himself up by leaning on his ornate cane. Bolts of crackling lightning spiraled from the rounded handle down to the tip. "There is something I must show you. It involves your payment, and perhaps your future," he added ominously.

Kyler's eyebrows went up involuntarily. "Where are we going, Bennington?" She rose and walked slowly, so as to not outdistance him with her long strides. He leaned heavily on his cane, wobbling with each step.

"Curious?" He stopped, sounding surprised. He looked her over like he was pricing something. "You've never been one that is overly curious, Kyler."

She started to reply, but then couldn't quite guess what he meant.

"I noticed you're favoring your left side a little," he said through a wheeze as he started ahead again.

"One of the villagers. Got me pretty good just at the bottom of my ribs."

"Slowing down?" he asked with what sounded like genuine concern in his voice.

Kyler smiled. "Maybe a little. I might just have to have myself harvested here soon," she said with a short laugh.

"I don't think you have to worry about that. You've amassed quite a little fortune as a Harvester. Many of the Collectors are impressed. Many of them have offered to buy your contract at sizable sums." He left it at that and Kyler could finish the rest.

They stopped at a lift-shaft and once inside, they began a whistling plummet downward. Bennington punched in a code on the console face and then turned to Kyler with a serious look trying to fight through all the fleshiness of his face. "What do you think of the Harvestings?"

Too confused to form an answer, she only stared at him through furrowed brows.

"Of course, you're a Harvester. But what do you think of what you do? Why do it? I need to know." Sweat formed fat lumps and then slid down his face only to be lost in the folds of his chin. Kyler thought it strange since the lift-shaft was well cooled.

"I believe in Harvesting completely. It simultaneously takes the burden off the people and the state, while providing better care for those harvested. It streamlines our society, which allows room for growth." She ran her fingers through the hair over her ear. "I had my own parents harvested when I was thirty. They had me late in life and just couldn't care for themselves any longer."

"Excellent!" he beamed. "What of the black-market?"

"The governments of the world will see the need for worldwide harvest sooner or later. It helps everyone: the government, the people who would have to care for them, and the people who need help." Kyler studied him, noting the way he kept fingering the rounded top to his cane. *Why question me, Bennington?* Did he suspect that she intended to turn him in to some government agency? She never thought of him as overly paranoid, and he'd always shown immense trust in her.

A long, pleased smile assuaged some of her fears. "The governments have already begun to see it, Kyler my dear. They understand the possible gains even better than you do." He wiped the glistening sweat from his forehead and this time it remained dry. He didn't speak again until they stopped at the thirty-second level.

Kyler had no idea that his estate reached so deep into the earth. She followed him out the door, still confused, but knowing that he would undoubtedly explain all soon.

"I've always liked you, Kyler," he said as they passed thermosteel walls. Whatever Bennington had down there, he intended it to be protected. "Do you know why?"

"Sparkling personality?"

"A like-mind, someone who understands the nuances

of the world, just how the gears mesh together to keep everything moving in the right direction. You are the best Harvester ever, Kyler. You have become one of the richest non-collectors in the country and it's time for you to take your place." He turned around to make sure he had her full attention.

"I'm going to show you something, Kyler. You are to be the first person allowed into our inner circle. The others disagreed; they said you had no place here, but I assured them that you would understand the scope of what it all meant."

"What is this about, Bennington?" She couldn't read anything from his face except peaked excitement.

"Come." He waved and led her around a corner.

What she saw made her body go cold, everything preconceived within her instantly vulcanized, emptying into an intangible pool on the floor, only to be replaced by an infinite dread that burned itself into her eyes and permeated every corner of her body.

Bodies – no, *people* – stacked three high, lined the walls that stretched far into the next chamber. Naked, they floated upright, suspended in a translucent gel that glowed with silent, amber tinges like phosphorescent fungus. They were packed side by side, one atop another, eyes glazed over with incomprehension. She looked close and the eyes had no color. They were pasty white, all the pigment dissolved by the suspension gel. Their flesh was mottled with grey patches. Kyler put her hand to her mouth, knowing that she would vomit if she'd eaten anything this morning.

"Yes, dear Kyler. This is what I wanted you to see. This is my collection!"

His voice sounded impossibly far away, a whisper at miles length. She was alone, in a horrible world where walls crashed with the sound of shattering crystal. Her eyes fixed themselves on the man before her. He looked strong, young, and healthy. She couldn't guess why he'd been harvested. Maybe he was a murderer, she tried to rationalize, but no sin could have deserved this punishment. She turned slowly to face Bennington. "You did this!"

He smiled as innocently as a gluttoned Burmese python. "No, Kyler. You did." He held his hands out to his sides. "All this, because of you."

"These people ... they could not have been harvested. What about meeting their needs?" Her eyes pulled her back to the young, healthy man in front of her. She extended her hand. The glass was cold. Her hand left a moist imprint that froze in place.

"They are alive, my dear. They are fed. They have all that they need, though after a few weeks in the sleeptanks, they cannot survive if removed." He clapped his meaty hands together. "And I have what I need. It is a mutual arrangement, just as it should be. And it will unify our world."

Kyler slumped away from the glass, broken. A thousand things she'd believed fell to dust within her. She looked as if she were shrinking, drawing in at the edges. "Why?" she asked meekly, all her strength gone.

"The major governments will dispense with money and different currencies. They are too erratic, fluctuate far too much to ever join as a single economy. Only one commodity will always maintain a set value."

Terror congealed into a cold lump in her stomach. She backed away from the sleeptank, the image of the old villager superimposing itself on her reflection. Wrong! she told herself. This is wrong!

"Lives will become the new currency, and only those with lives will rule," he said, a slim thread of madness shooting through his voice.

"What about the governments? They'll stop this, this!"

"The Collectors are the governments. Don't you understand? It's only taken thirty years of Harvesting for us to entrench ourselves in seats of power. No official would dare stand against us." He ambled over to her. "That man there you find so interesting, is a senator who wrote a bill to have Harvesting banned."

"Wrong, Bennington! This is wrong!" She finally managed to voice her horror.

"Wrong, dear Kyler? Why?"

"You can't just harvest anyone who stands in your way. It isn't a tool of intimidation. It will incite chaos, shatter what people believe." She was trembling, her eyes following the endless row after row of sleeptanks, all filled with floating bodies. Specimens in formaldehyde.

Bennington laughed and it was a horrible sound, filled with madness and truth. "We've already done it. For ten years, we've covered up our actions with minor wars, border clashes, or skirmishes with rebellions, all the while, eliminating all that stood in our way. And you, Kyler, you could easily become one of us. You already have enough money to begin a modest collection. In fact, I've thrown in a bonus with your payment for the Upper Chinese." He pushed a button on a control console on a center pillar, and the opposite wall lit up.

Another row of sleeptanks lined the wall. Four were filled. Kyler didn't have to look to know that one was a small child, the diabetic child she'd ripped from her weeping mother's arms the day before.

"Your payment," he said, waving her over for a closer look.

The terror in her stomach flared like an angry volcano. Kyler leaped the distance between them, leading her lunge with an upward kick that smashed his larynx. Bennington fell, wheezing and clutching at his throat.

Kyler pounced, screaming, "Where are my parents?" She throttled him until his face became a bright red, then took to slamming his head against the thermosteel floor. He tried to gasp something, but she didn't care. The terror had twisted itself into unquenchable rage, and Kyler didn't stop her assault until his head was a bloody, shapeless thing, a bag of meat filled with bone shards that slobbered its



contents onto the blue-grey, metal floors.

The rage slowed, and Kyler knew that security was coming. She could see the lights blinking on the lift-shaft. She spoke a command into her micro-communicator, then took Bennington's cane to the sleeptanks with their four inhabitants. Within a few moments, she found the hidden switch, and the crackling blade of energy pulsed to life from the tip of the cane.

She slashed the tanks open, the thick gel oozing out, carrying the villagers with it. Kyler fished the child out of the gel and cleared her mouth so she could breathe. She helped them all, then dragged them behind the center pillar with the control console, just as the lift-shaft registered its stop.

Three mesh-armored brutes burst out of the shaft, and Kyler slid right through them, cutting their legs out from under them. She snapped up, whipping the arms off a fourth with the cane-blade. The remaining two raised their blasters, and Kyler had to throw herself against the wall to avoid the shots. She hit the up button and the doors shut, the men inside too cautious to make a run for it. She made quick work of the three on the floor.

When the door opened the second time, Kyler blasted the men before they could even get out of the shaft. She dragged the villagers into the lift-shaft, then blasted the control console on the center pillar. It exploded with a shrieking, then blew arcing sparks outward with a steady spurting. As the lift-shaft doors closed, Kyler could see the amber color fading from the suspension gel.

As the lift-shaft hurtled upward, she positioned the villagers against the side walls, parallel to the door, hopefully out of the way of any weapon's fire. She made sure both blasters were set at maximum level, then spoke into her micro-communicator two levels below surface.

Just as the doors whisked open, a series of explosions rocked the estate. Glass shattered; men screamed; steel melted under the fire of the centaur-tank that sped right through the center of the estate. Bennington's security force hit the tank with all they had, but their handblasters could not penetrate the layers of thermosteel covering the centaur-tank. It rolled its tracks up to the open lift-shaft and Kyler loaded the villagers in, ducking to avoid falling debris.

She piloted the tank out of the estate, ignoring the repeated shots of the security forces. Once out of the main house, she pulverized the rows of vehicles until she was sure she had an adequate head start, then slammed down full throttle on the centaur-tank. She knew there was no going back. If a worldwide conspiracy did exist, then no safe place existed for her in the immediate area.

She had her centaur-tank and many contacts within her network of blackmarket Harvesters. She wondered how many of them really knew what was happening, and whether or not it would matter. All she knew for sure was that it mattered to her.

She glanced down at the four villagers, her eyes finding the diabetic child. Still unconscious, she was so very deli-

cate, just like fine porcelain, yet contained an inner strength that had refused to submit to the horrors of the Harvest.

"People before the State," she said slowly, as if the words were unknown to her. She never thought she would believe such words, but she knew it was true. She had glimpsed in a horrific instant what happened when an individual was subjugated to the will of a government, and would do whatever she could to prevent it from happening again.

Slowly, the village child's eyes fluttered open, like the wings of a butterfly come to life, and she began to cry. As the centaur-tank crashed ahead toward a future she'd never conceived, Kyler could only join her, think of what had become of her parents, and so many more.

LOOSE ENDS (for Chris)

by Corrine De Winter

Wind gives flight
to the dusty road.
We walk toward where

the crows are gathering,
past the toppled street lights
that are now only shells.

When Chris speaks
her voice is half-drowned
in the road of wind.
There has always been
a vine of melancholy inside her,

winding the way
a young girl tightly twirls
hair around a finger.

It's something that comes
from nowhere, pushing
for space
like the gust of wind
that rises without warning

to shake the trees.